

League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces
Education Study Committee

Public Education Commission, Eugene Gant, District 7

April 19, 2011, 10-11:15 a.m., Conference Room 2007A
Las Cruces City Hall

LWV Education Study Committee: Jane Asche, Sue Cain, Roberta Gran, and Bonnie Burn

1. Describe the role of the Public Education Commission (PEC) and its relationship to the Public Education Department and the public schools throughout NM.

The New Mexico Constitution, Article XII, Section 6, establishes the Public Education Department (PED) and an elected Public Education Commission (PEC) that is a cabinet department headed by a secretary of public education who is a qualified, experienced educator appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate.

The Commission is made up of 10 members who are elected for staggered terms of four years. Commission members must be residents of the public education commission district from which they are elected, and commissioners who chose to change residents are automatically terminated from their term of office. The commissioners receive per diem allocations to pay for expenses but do not receive a salary.

Doña Ana and precinct 1 of Otero County have been assigned to District 7. The elected commissioner is Eugene Gant. Mr. Gant brought eight years of experience as a Las Cruces Public (LCPS) School Board member to the position, and is serving his second term on the commission having been elected in 2007. During his terms on the LCPS School Board, he gained experience in finance, student issues, curriculum, and issues involving a major school district.

The secretary of public education has administrative and regulatory powers and duties, including all functions relating to the distribution of school funds and financial accounting for the public schools. The Public Education Commission is advisory to the secretary of education.

As an advisory body, the PEC shares the vision of the PED to provide “a world class education system in which all New Mexico students are prepared to succeed in a diverse, increasingly complex world.” The PEC is the state chartering authority, the governing body for state approved charter schools. It also partners with the PED in accomplishing the work of the PEC’s three primary committees. These committees work with PED staff on the following duties:

- Development and monitoring of the Public Education Department’s Strategic Plan (issued in January 14, 2005 and currently undergoing updating).
- Oversight of Charter Schools in coordination with the PED Division of Charter Schools.
- Oversight of the implementation of Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 that, through a grant application process, provides federal money for career technical education schooling. In 1984, this Act was first authorized. It was reauthorized in 1998, and again in 2006. Carl D. Perkins (D-KY) was a member of the U.S. House of Representative who served from 1949-1984.

New Mexico originally had a State Department of Education that was headed by a school superintendent. When Governor Bill Richardson (2003-2011) took office, he established a Secretary of Education as a cabinet position appointed by the governor.

2. **Specific Actions of PEC:** Mr. Gant has been involved with charter school authorization. The applications are reviewed and acted upon by the commissioners. The commissioners have worked to strengthen the application process and requirements for authorization and renewals that are required every five years. In the application process, if the requirements are not met, the application is denied. There is an appeal process. State authorization of charter school means that the schools are funded by the state and the district public school system is not involved. The commissioners are expected to visit all of the 83 charter schools across the state at least once a year as part of their monitoring activities.

Mr. Gant has also been very involved in the oversight of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act grants in NM.

3. **Specific Issues:** Mr. Gant shared his thoughts with us on a number of issues.
 - Adequate funding for education pre-K-12: Funding for education at one time was 51% of the state budget. That percentage has been decreased to 43% of the budget. Special revenues streams for education funding are no longer as substantial as in the past. Most mineral mines such as gold, uranium, and silver have been closed. A potential revenue tax on land is not available because the land is owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and is not taxable. The state is too dependent on taxes from oil and mineral rights to fund schools. A significant portion of education funds do come from the Gross Receipts Tax (GRT).
 - Education preparation of new teachers: The amount of time spent in student teaching in the classroom should be increased. Teachers now have to have additional skills and education to meet the challenges of the current classroom environment. The student population is complex. Many children in school live in poverty. There are divorced, single parent, and homeless families. **Some of these** children are from another country and do not speak English. They may stay in school only as long as their parents have work or the students **drop out to** work to help the family survive. The teacher has to fit this diversity into an educational experience for the student and help the student pass the test assessment in the NCLB program. An option to help the new teacher manage this environment is to be mentored by a more experienced teacher.
 - Teacher Performance: Overall teachers want to perform well and work hard to educate students. Teachers are being asked to do more with less of everything (e.g., salary, classroom resources, preparation time). The three-tiered salary program is encouraging teachers to move out of their comfort zone and to grow. The NCLB forced states to certify college graduates as teachers even though they have not taken any courses in educational pedagogy. Most schools have a cadre of dedicated teachers and students who wish to learn, despite some suggestion that about 2% of students are not interested in learning, and 1% of teachers are not truly interested in teaching, but continue to work so that they can secure a better retirement pension.
 - Student Testing: Stifles learning—as the saying goes, “the student has a mile-wide education that is an inch deep.” Teaching to the test narrows the curriculum. The concern with testing should be developing the student. Does the student learn to think? Does the student have the skills to function in a complex, democratic, global world?

- Teacher performance based on student testing: Mr. Gant has formed no opinion on this issue. He did mention the learning students lose when not in school. He believes that students are not in school enough days or hours in a given year. And he mentioned the many variables associated with testing that impact results (e.g., the type of test, the way students react to testing, and the result that the test is measuring). Special needs students are required to perform as regular students—this impacts the results. Educational development (that is student growth or progress over time) is not measured in NCLB testing. New Mexico has some of the highest reporting standards in the country. For instance some states don't report the NCLB results for categories of students that do not number 100 students or more in a given category, usually in small school districts. NM reports the results if there are 25 or more students in a category (e.g. special education students or a group of students at a particular grade level). This can make the results look better in some states in comparison to NM.
 - Grading of Schools A-F: Again, educational development is not measured by grading schools A-F. To achieve passing results, standards may be lowered, cheating may occur, and “teaching to the test” at the cost of a full curriculum is mentioned frequently by those who study the results of using this strategy to try to improve achievement.
 - Charter Schools: “Some charter schools really serve a wonderful purpose for some students.” Their class sizes are smaller and there is more interaction between the students and the teacher. The question remains, is a charter public school necessary when a traditional public school is available? Mr. Gant stated that regular public schools can do all that good charter schools do if they have the resources.
4. **Achievements of the Commission**: Members of PEC work as a team. A major focus for PEC was improving the application process for authorizing and renewing the applications of charter schools. The process has been enhanced. There is a lot of oversight involved. Charter Schools now have to understand the requirements and have to explain how they will meet the expectations. Facilities have to be adequate. PEC has received an award from the National Charter School Association for its work in this area.

The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 provides funding to New Mexico to increase the quality of technical education within the U.S. in order to help the economy. (See p. 1 for details). PEC ensures that goals of the program are met. This program requires a great deal of oversight.

5. **Strengths and weakness of LCPS:**

Strengths of the District: There is a cadre of dedicated people from the top administrators down to the service personnel who make the system successful. They care about students and the facilities and maintain the buildings and classroom environment.

Weaknesses of the District: NCLB testing requirements. Teachers need more time to teach. Teachers also need planning time in the day which will be lost, especially at the high school level, as the district is forced to downsize the teaching staff due to funding cuts. Teachers will then have to teach additional classes to make up for the loss of instructional staff or class sizes will have to be increased beyond the state required class size limits. Lack of adequate funding is a reality for school districts. Increased pedagogical skills should be made available to new teachers. Principals and teachers need more education about budgeting and potentially moving to a decentralized budgeting process. Parents and grandparents need to be involved.



League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces

Questions for Eugene Gant, Commissioner, District 7

NM Public Education Commission

Tuesday, April 19, 2011, 10-11:15 a.m.

Las Cruces City Hall, Conference Room 2007C

1. Describe the role of the Public Education Commission (PEC) and its relationship to the Public Education Department and the public schools throughout NM.
2. What specific actions does the PEC take to ensure that students in NM acquire the skills and knowledge of a successful education that enables them to be responsible citizens and to experience success in employment?
3. What specific actions have you taken to achieve the goals set for NM public schools in your region, District 7, of the State?
4. Themes that have surfaced throughout our research and interviews are listed below. Please tell us your views about
 - Adequate funding for education pre-K-12
 - Education preparation for new teachers
 - Teacher performance
 - Student testing
 - Teacher performance based on student testing.
 - Grading of Schools A-F
 - Charter Schools
5. As you enter a new term of office on the Commission, please tell us what you achieved during your previous term and what you expect to achieve during your current term in office.
6. How did your service on the Las Cruces Public School Board assist your performance on PEC?
7. As you view the current public education system in Las Cruces, what do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?